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Bill to Halt Release Of Classified Items Submitted by CIA

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WASHINGTON—Reagan administration officials are considering legislation to stop unauthorized release of classified information, but the idea is likely to run into strong opposition from many lawmakers and some Justice Department prosecutors.

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes confirmed yesterday that the Central Intelligence Agency submitted for White House approval a draft bill calling for tough penalties against federal officials who improperly disclose classified documents or other material to reporters or others. But Mr. Speakes said the White House hasn't decided whether to support such legislation, and other administration officials said a decision could be months away.

Mr. Speakes told reporters that the proposal wasn't requested by President Reagan or his staff. Senior officials at the Office of Management and Budget are likely to analyze the draft bill before a final decision is made on whether to submit it to Congress, he said.

Details of the draft legislation were first reported by the New York Times yesterday. The CIA for years has advocated such legislative solutions, but they never generated enough support among lawmakers. The new proposal indicates CIA director William J. Casey is stepping up efforts to get such legislation passed.

The Justice Department also has objected to such legislation on the grounds that existing criminal laws barring espionage and theft of government property are adequate to prosecute security leaks. One senior Justice Department official said the draft bill currently is under review by department attorneys and a recommendation to the White House may be several months away. Some White House aides and department officials privately expressed skepticism about the chances of such a bill in Congress.

The draft could revive the controversial issue of whether journalists should be prosecuted for printing classified information obtained through unauthorized sources.

During a news conference yesterday, Attorney General Edwin Meese suggested that the Justice Department isn't interested in prosecuting journalists for security breaches. "I don't see quite how (existing laws) would affect a newspaper" or provide federal authority to prosecute journalists in most cases, Mr. Meese told reporters. He said he "hoped" that "journalistic ethics would prevent" disclosure of classified information in most cases.